

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

11th February 2024 – Transfiguration Sunday

Mark 9:2-9

GOD'S LOVE IN THE DOWNS AND THE UPS

Some of you may have seen, and most of you have probably heard of, the *Christ the Redeemer* statue, which stands prominently above the Brazilian city of Rio de Janeiro. The statue itself, excluding the pedestal, is 30 metres tall, and its arms stretch 28 metres wide. Completed in 1931 it's designed to bring glory to God and to remind all people of God's love for them in Jesus. And that's great, and I'm sure that in many cases it does just that. Similar statues or crosses have been erected on high places around the world, being looked up to as they look down upon, in places like Dili in East Timor, and recently in central Australia near the community of Haasts Bluff a large cross has been erected on a hill. And again, like the crosses we put on top of our own worship buildings, or even the grand cathedrals we build, they do show off God's power and glory, and give a strong witness to Him.

But the city of Rio de Janeiro, like probably all very large cities, also has a lot of people living in poverty. In fact, 1.5 million people, or 22% of that city's population, live in what we would call slums. And you have to wonder, what do they see when they look up at that statue of God's love looking down on them, as they struggle to feed themselves and their families, to escape abuse and crime, as they live a life of poverty which they know they have no hope of getting themselves out of? As God is 'looking down' on them from on high, do they feel His love and care, or, like the song that was popular in the early '90s, do they feel that God is watching them, 'from a distance'?

We can, and do, do the same thing; place God up high in this rarefied and glorious place, where it is always sunshine, there is no hardship; stick with God and life will be happy and comfortable and you will always have all you need. Sound ridiculous? We mean well and have good intentions, but sometimes when people are going through hard times we try to comfort them with sayings we think are in the Bible but really aren't, like; 'God never gives us more than we can handle', 'God never closes one door without opening other'. Or we seek to give comfort by things which are true, but which perhaps people aren't really wanting to hear at that time, like: 'God is always with you, giving you strength whatever happens'.

Sometimes we also want to put God, and His love for us in Jesus, high up on the mountain where the sun is always shining, the clouds are pushed away, and to believe and teach that to be with Him means we can easily rise above whatever comes at us.

It's a bit hard then to criticise the apostle Peter for what he does in this story of the Transfiguration we have here today. Just a few days before this Jesus told the disciples that He would be rejected, suffer and die, and Peter had said, 'no Lord, that will never happen', for which he earned a rebuke from Jesus. And now, here Peter is, accompanying Jesus along with James and John, as Jesus goes up a mountain to pray. While they are there, they see Jesus transformed in dazzling white before them, and He is joined by two of the great men of God from the Old Testament, Moses and Elijah, and the three disciples even hear the voice of God proclaim Jesus as His Son and the command that they should listen to Him! No wonder, after Jesus' talk of betrayal, suffering and death, Peter thought, 'this is more like it!', and suggested to Jesus that they make this moment of glory more permanent and build three shelters to keep everyone there. Isn't that what we sometimes do in our words, our hopes, our teachings; try to stay on the mountains, where the sun shines and life with what it brings doesn't try to pull us down?

But Jesus knew that this experience wasn't meant to be permanent, but it was His Father getting Him ready for what was coming next; His journey to the cross, with all that involved. He knew He had to go down to the reality of life down in the valley. In a way what happened here with Jesus is a bit like what we do when we come together for worship: we come to praise God for His glory. To hear in His Word His promise of love, care, and peace. To be equipped and encouraged by Him and to encourage one another. And then, to be sent back to be living out and sharing the love of God which He wants all the world to know. The mountain experiences are important for strength, guidance, peace, and hope. Also important in living out what we are now called to do, and a real part of our lives, is going back to the valleys with all we face there also.

'I know that God is with me, but I am still struggling'. Have you ever felt like that? Perhaps you're feeling like that right now? Have you ever felt guilty for having those kinds of struggles, doubts? Again, our human thinking, even sometimes as Christians, is that having faith is all about the Razzle Dazzle, being above the clouds, not having to face anything we can't breeze through, even that we will be

better off all round in life because whatever we give for God He will repay at least tenfold in our lives! And if you're not experiencing that maybe you need to look at what you're not doing or giving enough of! Can those kinds of messages, either intentionally or not, either come from, or be heard by, us as Christians?

'I know that God is with me, but I am still struggling'. Is it wrong to feel like that? Does it show a lack of faith, trust, reliance on God? To me that is exactly what Jesus is saying when He prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane before He suffered and died, saying, 'if it is possible, please take this cup from me'. Jesus, who was both God and human, who in both His baptism and at the Transfiguration heard God proclaim Him as His Son, who met with Moses and Elijah, He could still pray before His biggest test: 'Father, life is sometimes tough down here in the valleys, I'm struggling with it'. He knew that God was with Him in His life, that it would all work out, but that didn't mean He would always be just walking on the mountain tops.

For us in our Church year this day of Transfiguration sits between the end of Epiphany and the start of Lent. And that's important. Epiphany is about the light of God's love going out into the world for all people. In a way it's about the glory, the mountaintop; that God in His love and His strength and His guidance is with us in all we go through. Epiphany takes us for a walk along the ridges to see all the blessings God does give us. And that is important, and true, and thank God it is.

But now we move into Lent, back to the valleys, to where life often happens. Lent focuses on Jesus' journey to the cross, where Jesus gave up His life for us. And the cross symbolises what happens down in the valleys. On the cross, we see how great God's love for us really is, that He will do anything for us, including giving up His own Son to die. On the cross we see God finding a way to deal with our sin and rebellion and allow us to come back to Him. On the cross, through Jesus, we see God experiencing not just physical pain and death, but betrayal, hurt, broken relationships, fear, loneliness, feelings of futility and grief, what it is to love those who don't love back, even something we will never go through; abandonment by God Himself. On the cross, through Jesus, God came down into the valley to know and go through all we go through in life, and not just that, but to now walk alongside us. Through the cross,

and all that happened there, God now says to us at our low times, 'I know you're struggling. I'm still here. Lean on me as you can, and know that I'm still holding onto you even when you can't hold on to me'.

I don't want to be pulling down all those statues and crosses around the world which are high up on mountains or buildings; I think they do a great job of witnessing to God. But they, like the sayings and words we sometimes use about God getting us through everything with ease, show the glory side of it all, not the struggling and suffering side which is also a part of life. We don't want to be looking up at the cross, either literally or figuratively, seeing God's love up there high above us all, while we go through the stuff of life down here below. We want the cross to be with us, in all ways, knowing that the cross and all that it tells us about Jesus and about God's love for us is right down here with us. Every day. Whatever we go through.

The life of Jesus, all that He did and said, shows us that God's love is with us in the downs and the ups of our lives. From the glory of the times we have with God and the many joys and blessings life brings us, to those times which aren't so happy, or we find hard, or we out and out struggle through. Like Jesus, we need those times with God on the mountains, being strengthened and fed by Him. But then as we too go back to the reality of life, we know that God is not up above watching us from a distance, but through Jesus and the cross He is right beside us, sometimes even carrying us, along the way we go with Him. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- The mountain top experiences are a part of our lives, and part of our relationship with God. Are there times, experiences, places, when/where you feel close to God, at peace, when you feel you can take on and face whatever comes before you? Thank God for these times and blessings.
- Just as real are the valleys, the hard times, the struggle stuff of life. Are there things you are struggling with right now, or have struggled with in the past, or things coming up in your life which you are worried about how to deal with? Give these over to God and ask for His guidance and strength as you face them.
- We can thank God for the mountains and the valleys of our lives with Him. Think about your life, and how what God shows us of Himself in Jesus on the cross helps you in the downs and the ups of life.

Pray: Thank God for the blessings and faith and life highs He gives us. Ask Him to help us to be honest and open in our struggles and hardships, and to know that He is with us no matter where the valleys take us.

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